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SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT TEACHING READING TO SOCIALLY
DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN AND YOUTH.

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BASED ON "COLD DATA," SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE
PROBLEMS OF TEACHING READING TO SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED
CHILDREN ARE LISTED AND BRIEFLY DISCUSSED. AMONG THEM ARE THE
FOLLOWING--(1) MOST OF THESE CHILDREN ARE RETARDED READERS,
BUT THEY LEARN TO READ IN SPITE OF, AND PRIOR TO THE SOLUTION
OF, THEIR PSYCHOSOCIAL PROBLEMS, (2) WORD ATTACK SKILLS
INCLUDING PHONICS SHOULD BE PART OF THE INSTRUCTION IN
REMEDIAL READING PROGRAMS FOR THESE CHILDREN, (3) BECAUSE
THEY TEND TO BE VISUAL RATHER THAN AUDITORY READERS, THEY
SHOULD BE GIVEN LINGUISTIC-PHONIC INSTRUCTION AS EARLY AS
BEGINNING READING PROGRAMS, (4) BECAUSE THESE CHILDREN HAVE
DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES, THE CONTENT, LEVEL, AND RATE OF
THEIR LEARNING SHOULD BE ADJUSTED TO MEET THEIR INDIVIDUAL
NEEDS, AND (5) TEACHERS DO NOT KNOW ABOUT NEW AND APPROPRIATE
MATERIALS AND METHODS FOR TEACHING THESE CHILDREN. THIS PAPER
WAS PRESENTED AT THE NEW YORK STATE ENGLISH TEACHERS COUNCIL
(KIAMESHA LAKE, NEW YORK, APRIL 22, 1966). (JL)

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SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT TEACHING READING TO SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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Here are two hunches and twelve conclusions about teaching socially disadvantaged children to read and write. Cold data back the conclusions. The hunches are on thinner ice.

Hunch One: Most characteristics listed in the literature on socially disadvantaged youth echo textbooks on the adolescent. Certain language patterns are peculiar to slum children. But many psycho-social characteristics associated with socially disadvantaged youth are, in fact, characteristics of adolescents in general, disadvantaged or not.

Hunch Two: Suburban kids sit still, read "Look Jane! Look!" get in line in a hurry, and do their homework no matter how meaningless the task. Slum kids are not as acquiescent; unless it is really meaningful, they are less likely to play according to school rules.

Now, to safer grounds--conclusions based on data:

Conclusion One: Compensatory programs for socially disadvantaged children have not proved successful. The reasons appear to be that they have not specified goals; they have not delimited goals (they usually bite off more than they can chew); they have not controlled relevant variables; they have not measured outcomes accurately.

Conclusion Two: Most Puerto Rican, Negro, Mexican American and Appalachian White children are retarded in reading. Not many, but most. Many educational administrators that I have talked with are not just kidding visitors to their schools; this is understandable if not defensible. More seriously, they are kidding themselves by not recognizing and accepting the magnitude of the problem. When they kid themselves, there is little chance of affecting significant change in reading instruction for these unfortunate children. For example, one superintendent of a city slum school system conceded that four or five children at the end of grade one in a particular school might be below grade level in reading in June. When we administered the entire Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulty battery individually to all first graders in this school, only two or three children per classroom were reading on grade level. Every other child was already retarded in reading.

Conclusion Three: Most children learn to read, write and do arithmetic in spite of psycho-social problems. Psycho- or socio-therapy does not need to precede reading instruction.

Conclusion Four: Culturally deprived children learn to read before their emotional problems are solved. Many learn to read while they continue to live in slums with prostitutes for mothers and narcotics addicts for fathers. If we wait until we win the War on Poverty before we teach disadvantaged children to read, we might as well close down slum schools for the rest of this century. On the other hand, if we could teach reading thoroughly to 90% of the Negro children in Bedford Stuyvesant we would do more for social change in the War on Poverty than any brainstorm of Sargent Shriver.

A comment on Conclusions Three and Four: The best elementary school I have seen this year is in the heart of Harlem serving severely socially disadvantaged children. More children are reading on or above grade level and are enjoying an exciting fuller curriculum than in most suburban schools I have seen. Two blocks away a principal whose school serves the same type of population keeps telling me how impossible it is to teach anything to these disturbed children from such deprived backgrounds.

Conclusion Five: Phonics in any form by any name will not win the War on Poverty. Nor will it solve the reading problems of culturally deprived children. However, we do know that retarded readers, socially disadvantaged or not, lack word attack skills including phonics skills. We do know that training in these word attack skills is one necessary component in a remedial program.

Since these children have so little time

Specifically we know that most socially disadvantaged retarded readers in seventh grade do not know the alphabet. We know further, that most do not discriminate sounds in words accurately. Most retarded reading Negro and Puerto Rican children in the early grades do not discriminate letters accurately. We know that auditory discrimination of sounds in words and visual discrimination of letters are two prerequisites to successful reading for all children regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic level.

Conclusion Six: Most socially disadvantaged retarded readers tend to be visual rather than auditory or phonic readers. This is probably true of middle class retarded readers as well. Their visual memory scores are low, but they are significantly higher than their auditory discrimination of sounds in words scores. We also know from abundant experience that once hooked on a sight approach to reading, these children are extremely difficult to move to a phonic and structural approach to word attack. This suggests that a linguistic-phonetic skill should be built into the beginning reading program early in formal and informal reading instruction--as early, perhaps as kindergarten. This explains partially why blending sounds is so difficult to teach to retarded readers and leads this author to suggest that sounds in words or digraphs be taught without blending.

Conclusion Seven: The perceptual development of culturally deprived children at the beginning reading grades (K through three) is severely impaired. Since these children have so little going

for them in other areas, these perceptual dysfunctions preclude the possibility of most of them learning to read well. One major component of a Headstart and kindergarten program should be perceptual training.

Conclusion Eight: Compensatory programs for culturally deprived children are usually more of the same. Most ESEA Title I projects attack quantity rather than quality. More services, longer hours devoted to reading instruction, more basal readers, more time with the teacher will not solve the problem of reading retardation in socially disadvantaged children. New programs utilizing new methods and materials geared to changing quality rather than quantity are needed.

Conclusion Nine: One particular approach to teaching reading to culturally deprived children is not the answer to their reading retardation. Culturally deprived children are human beings. They are members of a species made up of individuals with different learning styles. That means they must be taught as individuals.

Conclusion Ten: Thorough, continuous, quality instruction will teach culturally deprived children to read. A high intensity learning program in which content, level and rate are adjusted to individual needs has worked every time this author has tried it with socially disadvantaged children and youth.

Conclusion Eleven: Most teachers do not know what materials and methods are available for teaching socially disadvantaged children. In addition they do not read journals and are unaware of

research and programs conducted in many sections of the country. Like lawyers and medical doctors, teachers blame (with good reason) their poor professional training for their deficiencies. But unlike most lawyers and doctors, teachers often do not make up these deficiencies once they enter the field.

Conclusion Twelve: The culturally deprived child depends more upon the school for language development and general verbal intelligence than does the middle class child. In fact, the latter learns most of his verbal behavior, including reading, informally through his home environment. Thus the school has never really had to teach reading and language development. A sort of quick and dirty glossing over has been enough to get middle class children "on grade level." Now the culturally deprived child has been discovered and we educators are on the spot.

I hope we can deliver. Right now I have my doubts. If we do not deliver, we will be replaced, and by "we" I mean the public schools. Perhaps that gradual replacement has already started under the aegis of the War on Poverty. Look closely and you will see what I mean.